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ABSTRACT

Civic knowledge, skills, and the disposition to use them to achieve a vision of the community that is desired can be furthered through purposefully structured civic education. Informed judgment and action with regard to the public's affairs is the goal of adult civic education. The integral elements of adult civic education are information, values, and action. An objective in adult civic education should be to help citizens learn how to use the aid of experts and qualified professionals in making public policy decisions while limiting it to citizen review and control. Another problem for adult civic education is to help learners develop civic virtue as a basis for acting when their involvement in a public issue in the first place is often driven by emotional investment in a special interest, deflecting attention from a larger view of public responsibilities. The ultimate objective of civic education is to help citizens learn to be morally responsible actors. Adult educators have responsibility to serve as advocates, not of specific choices or solutions to public issues, but of thoughtful and deliberate choice that is a prelude to action. (YLB)

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NO. 129

ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Adult Civic Education

by David L. Boggs

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The purposes of this *ERIC Digest* are first, to highlight the significance of adult civic education in a democracy, and second, to examine the substance of adult civic education in order to answer the question, "What information and knowledge, dispositions and values, and ultimately actions are required by citizens in order to attend to the public's business in the practice of democratic citizenship?"

Political commentators (Broder 1989; Yankelovich 1988) and citizenship theorists (Barber 1984; Bellah and Associates 1985; Janowitz 1983; Pratte 1988) alike worry about disengagement of the American body politic from community affairs, from politics, and from public life. They cite widespread tendencies to privatize things that have heretofore been public, to place a higher premium on private rights than public and social obligations, not to see connections between private interests and public policy issues, and to allow special interests to supercede the public good.

The quality of democracy seems to depend upon the degree to which civic education can assist adult citizens in finding meaningful bases for participation in public affairs (Boggs 1991a). Through participation, new areas in which learning through discussion, reflection, and further study is desirable are identified. At the same time, participation presumes some knowledge of the community, of government, and of the problem or issue at hand. It requires skills necessary to function successfully in groups and contribute effectively to their work. Its primary function, according to Barber (1984), is the education of judgment which leads to rational choice. The problem for democracy and for adult education has always been the same: how to keep citizens and learners responsible for the whole community, while leaving them free to and indeed assisting them in reaching personal objectives.

Definition and Conditions

Adult civic education can be defined as "the purposeful and systematic effort to develop in adults the skills and dispositions to function effectively as citizens in their communities as well as in the larger world. The purpose is to both develop understanding and judgment about public issues and to contribute to guided and informed decisions and actions through deliberation, public talk, and dialogue" (Boggs 1991b, p. 5).

It is characterized by three conditions. First, it is context specific. Disputes over such issues as taxes, zoning, and annexation and the positions and philosophies of political candidates find their context in the lives of adults. Second, the civic knowledge that adults require is both continually expanding and incomplete at the same time. Each week, if not daily, developments challenge the capacity of citizens to respond with understanding and competence. Third, understanding the political environment requires engagement with it. Since the conditions are dynamic, there is much we cannot know until we try it. Only in the political process are certain kinds of insights possible. Civic knowledge arises out of the interconnection between reflection and action.

Integral Elements

The integral elements of adult civic education are information, values, and action. Programs that include all three elements enable citizens to–

- collect and interpret data in order to be informed about and influence public decisions and policies;
- examine their priorities and values when confronted with the challenges of an ever-changing society where resources are shrinking and new technology poses both problems and opportunities;
- acquire skills to direct social change in ways that further their vision of a better society; and
- discover and define bases for political participation, including specific steps for practical action.

Information

To practice democracy, citizens require information about complex local and national issues from air quality to zoning and the skills and wisdom to put the information to effective use. Boyte (1989) explores the responsibilities and capabilities of citizens as agents of democracy in an "information age." His thesis is that effective citizenship is possible if–and only if–"citizens develop the abilities to gain access to information of all kinds . . . and the skills to put such information to effective use" (p. 5). Thus knowledge about often increasingly technical issues, as a resource to be shared by citizens, as well as values, virtue, and moral judgments about political actions, are all inescapable elements in citizenship.

An objective in adult civic education should be to help citizens learn how to use the aid of experts and qualified professionals in making public policy decisions while limiting it to citizen review and control. Interactions among citizens as learners are distinctive precisely because they are interactions among equals; as such, they have no binding authority over one another in respect to the subject matters of their interactions as citizens.

Values

At the heart of choices about concrete and specific situations lie inescapable questions about often conflicting values. Political choosing involves moral reasoning and acting with reference to conflicting standards about what is important to a community. The problem for adult civic education is to help learners develop civic virtue as a basis for acting when their involvement in a public issue in the first place is often driven by emotional investment in a special or "hot" interest, deflecting attention from a larger view of public responsibilities.

Civic virtue involves first, interest in community issues and public affairs, second, willingness to be involved in matters of importance to the commonwealth, and third, an attitude of civility and decency toward one's fellow citizens. Pratte (1988) says: "Civic virtue is not a matter of mere behavior; it is a matter of forming a civic disposition, a willingness to act, in

behalf of the public good while being attentive to and considerate of the feelings, needs, and attitudes of others. It implies an obligation or duty to be fair to others, to show kindness and tact, and to render agreeable service to the community" (p. 17).

In this technological age, the actions that citizens take in the public sphere, whether in regard to land use or solid waste disposal or any other of the myriad problems facing local communities, have enormous ramification for themselves and generations to come. Hence forming civic conscience is fundamental because it involves behaving morally toward others as a response to their basic dignity and worth.

Action

The ultimate objective of civic education is to help citizens learn to be morally responsible actors. At its core, responsible citizenship involves responsible involvement in public issues. Adult educators have responsibility to serve as advocates, not of specific choices or solutions to public issues, but of thoughtful and deliberate choice that is a prelude to action. Through participation in adult civic education, citizens should be able to recognize and talk openly about moral choices and to make more reflective judgments about them.

Adult educators run the risk of being viewed as advocates for particular positions or for specific solutions to public problems. Their role needs to be made clear. Promoting study and reflection on public matters does not mean advocating a particular solution or point of view. Rather it signals commitment to facilitating full inquiry and understanding by the public regarding its choices. Adult educators are advocates only in the sense of helping citizens with the task of becoming informed about complex problems and choices that often have long-term consequences.

Conclusion

Civic knowledge, skills, and the disposition to use them in order to achieve a vision of the community that is desired can be furthered through purposefully structured civic education. Informed judgment and action with regard to the public's affairs–dynamic and effective citizenship in full bloom–is the goal of adult civic education. Certainly, other imperatives stemming from economic and social forces, technological and social change, and demographic and occupational trends should command the attention of adult educators. Yet none of the imperatives to which adult education agencies respond is immune to the debilitating consequences of erosion of a strong and active sense of citizenship.

The challenge is to infuse an understanding of citizen responsibilities and a capacity for thinking about political issues in educational programs for learners as diverse as pharmacists (continuing professional education), tradespersons (adult vocational education), and high school dropouts (adult basic education). All the purposes adults seek to attain through additional education, in the end, rest upon democracy as an enabling condition. As society becomes more fragmented, and conversely, the world more interdependent, and as technology improves life while making it more complex, the future of democracy will increasingly depend on the ability of citizens to make wise and unselfish choices.

The skills of citizenship can be learned through civic education programs that encourage participants to move outside the confines of what is familiar and comfortable and explore new information and perspectives. Civic education promotes the ability to make connections, to see causal situations and outcomes, and to understand the relationship between the individual and the larger community. Civic education challenges citizens to recognize the interrelationship of specific private issues with larger public problems and to use civic skills in solving them.

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